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THE PLACE OF FORGIVENESS IN CHRISTIANITY.

No one who does not propose to drop confession out of Christian prayer—and with the Lord's Prayer in view this is for the most part regarded as an extreme step—can fail to recognise the centrality of the topic of Forgiveness amid the interests of the theologian. Of the possible short formulas expressive of the specific nature of our religion one certainly would be : Christian faith is faith in God who forgives sins through Jesus Christ. Söderblom has remarked with point that you can drag the idea of Love down to the partially immoral plane of natural religions ; you cannot so drag the idea of forgiveness. In the latter notion there lies a preserving salt which can usually be trusted to defy corruption. Forgiveness undoubtedly is one of the *foci* from which it is possible to survey the whole circumference of Christian truth. It involves a distinctive view of God, of man, of sin, of the universe as supernaturally constituted, of Jesus. The theologian finds, as he reflects upon other doctrines, that of them all none can keep its uniquely Christian tone which has lost touch with this one.

The theological importance of the subject flows of course from its importance for Christian life. No one can intelligently take rank as a Christian, in the New Testament sense, who has not received the pardon of sin, and who is not conscious that in its impartation something has happened of decisive moment for his relations with God. Missionaries have often tended to gauge the maturity of the religious life of their converts by the earnestness and sincerity of their interest in forgiveness.

To crown all, the forgiveness of sins has a quite fundamental position in the teaching of Jesus. History exhibits no prophet or founder of religion who came forward,

as He did, with the claim to have power from God to remit sin. His contemporaries were clearly aware that in taking up this attitude His aim was not merely to announce the objective general truth or principle that forgiveness is possible, but also to present Himself as the medium and guarantee of its reality. In His person the Kingdom of God is here, and by all higher minds of Jewish religion forgiveness had invariably been regarded as amongst the chief blessings which the Kingdom would include.

Further, the place occupied by this topic in the history both of religious experience and of theology is proved by the close tie, if not indeed identity, existing between the ideas of Forgiveness and Justification. How these ideas really differ, if rightly interpreted, it is hard to see. Doubtless it may be argued that forgiveness is exclusively negative in meaning, signifying no more than that past sin is blotted out, the slate being so to speak wiped clean, whereas Justification has positive implications and lays down that God puts the sinner in right relations to Himself, not merely obliterating sin but taking the penitent into fellowship. Every student of Protestant theology knows that volumes formerly were written, and once had to be read, in which this distinction, or something like it, was upheld. The distinction may not be impossible in theory: it has not the faintest bearing on experience. Whether it might be urged consistently enough on a lower spiritual level than Christianity, we need not ask; what is quite certain is that the God and Father of Jesus Christ cannot be thought of as doing the merely negative thing of cancelling the sinner's guilt except as in and by that very act He takes him to His heart as a returning child. To be justified is simply to be forgiven and accepted by God. Much or most of the famous debate on Justification, therefore, has really been about forgiveness. Good reasons, it is true, can be

given for keeping the term Justification in hand for purposes of exact statement at this or that point; it usefully suggests, for example, that the pardoned can raise no claim, as of right, to God's acceptance. At the same time, the term forgiveness is obviously far closer to human life; and to retain it as the normal word might help some people to believe, what seems too good to be true, that theology is nothing else than a persistent attempt to clarify the convictions we stand up to preach. When the older divines wrote on Justification, then, whatever else was in their minds, they were at all events absorbed in the question of Divine forgiveness. We may not use their terminology or imitate their love of infinitesimal distinctions; but at least they were toiling at a problem about which every preacher of Christ has got to make up his mind.

Is forgiveness the chief boon conferred in Christ? In the preface to the first edition of his great monograph Ritschl says it is: justification and reconciliation, he affirms, is the central doctrine of Christianity, and to make it intelligible a virtually complete outline of the theological system is required. Others have taken the chief gift in Christianity to be sonship in Christ, or the sacraments, or moral inspiration; to Tennyson, one remembers, it was the assurance of immortality. Possibly the savagest expression ever given to the view that justification is *not* of supreme importance comes from Paul de Lagarde, who had a trick of blurting out what many thought but scarcely cared to put in plain words. "The doctrine of justification," he wrote in 1890, "is not the Gospel, but a Pauline eccentricity. Even in Paul it is not the only or the deepest way of solving the problem of a man's relation to his guilt. It was not the basal principle of the Reformation, and now, to crown all, in Protestant churches it is dead. And rightly. The doctrines of justification and reconciliation are mythology

believed by nobody except those who take ancient Trinitarianism seriously—which to-day means nobody at all." [1]

But to ask what is best or second-best in the Gospel is not usually very profitable. After all the Christian message offers not a number of things but the one comprehensive and infinitely precious boon of salvation, i.e., fellowship with God; and while this no doubt embraces a variety of aspects, it is still more deeply a spiritual unity. And unless we are to break every link with New Testament religion, forgiveness comes into this, and vitally. As Lincoln said, "no man can escape history." We cannot by this time make Christianity over again; facts have fixed its nature; and in every age it has had such forgiveness at its heart. There is no need to quote the New Testament; we should have to write out whole pages. But there is the Apostles' Creed, which enumerates forgiveness in its place among the other supernatural things—for everything in the Creed is supernatural—like the creation of the world and the resurrection of Christ and the gift of life everlasting—"I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins." There is the Epistle of Barnabas, at the close of the first century, declaring in spite of its Alexandrian mysticism: "To this end the Lord endured to deliver His flesh unto corruption, that by the remission of sins we might be cleansed." There is St. Ambrose in the fourth century, with his passionate tones: "I have nothing whereof I may glory in my works; I will therefore glory in Christ. I will not glory because I am righteous, but because I am redeemed; not because I am clear of sin, but because my sins are forgiven." In the Middle Ages there is St. Bernard of Clairvaux with the admonition: "See that thou believe this also, that it is through Himself thy sins are pardoned: this is the witness of the Holy Spirit speaking in thy heart, Thy sins are for-

[1] *Deutsche Schriften.*

given thee."[1] There are the great words of Luther: "Where forgiveness of sins is, there is life and blessedness." The doctrine of justification by faith, not necessarily under that title, has a way of turning up in new majesty and power in every time of revival; but when religion sinks in apathy, it is one of the first convictions to lose elasticity and vigour.

St. Paul in the first instance, Luther as his disciple, have done more than any others to lead the Church into full self-consciousness with regard to pardon. Each attained to clear insight respecting the terms on which sin is taken away as the outcome not of quiet or scholarly development, but of a desperate fight for his soul. Under new conditions, Luther was compelled to repeat St. Paul's conflict in order to regain St. Paul's truth. Water passes into steam only at a certain heat, and it looks as if there had to be a life-and-death struggle, a violent spiritual fermentation and disturbance, liberating great religious forces, before the free unbought grace of a forgiving God could be newly seized and uttered greatly. Everything in Christianity was then apt to group itself around this point. Harnack has said of Luther that "for him the certainty of forgiveness in Christ was the sum of religion."

But although forgiveness may be the keystone of the arch, it is none the less an idea which creates vast difficulties for the modern mind. Partly these are intellectual or what may be called æsthetic difficulties which face the Christian view of things as a whole; partly they relate specially to the evangelical notion of Divine pardon. In various recent engagements with negative thought, that notion has had to bear the brunt of some of the hardest fighting. To the most grave among these modern objections let us now turn.

[1] See article "Rechtfertigung" in Hauck's *Real-Encyclopädie* (3rd edition).

(1) The question of Divine forgiveness is occasionally put aside as perfectly unreal, because concerned merely with a moral puzzle of our own making. To ask how forgiveness comes about, it is said, assumes its necessity, but in fact it is not necessary at all. Now it is of course evident that the idea of forgiveness is only relevant to the pained or heavy-laden conscience; and in order that conscience should be pained, or at least that its pain should be confessed, certain presuppositions must in principle be accepted. One of these is the reality of sin, flowing from a consciousness of God in His being as Holy Love, and of the obligation resulting for us also to live in love and holiness. These are great ideas, with great implications; but they are by no means universally received. Apart from human tendencies familiar in every age, the materialistic or mechanistic monism which has darkened the sky for more than a generation renders it difficult for a good many people to take moral distinctions as in any sense absolute, or as more than useful and provisional social conventions. Guilt has no meaning for men and women who regard themselves as victims of heredity, education and environment, with no more accountability for character than barometer for cyclone.

Whether this mood can be dispelled by reasoning is more than doubtful. The man who pleads it in his own case, professing to need no forgiveness because everything in his life which religious people call sin can justly be put down to his parents' account, or his schoolmaster's, or his employer's, is commonly a humbug, and is invariably without a sense of humour. But the plea might conceivably be urged by an upright mind on behalf of others. "I am responsible," he might say, "but I know people who have had no real chance of goodness and in regard to whom one cannot use the word responsibility without a sense of sheer

irrelevance." In reply to this estimate, superficially kind but actually merciless, since it proposes to treat human beings as no better than animals, it must first be pointed out that the great literature of the world is dead against it. Æschylus, Virgil, Shakespeare—you take a vital element out of their atmosphere so that the very lungs refuse to work if you eliminate the truth of man's responsibility. Deny the weight on a man's conscience of the evil things he has done, and the tragic dramatist cannot get a beginning made. Besides, if the habit of penitence, or the capacity for it, might in one respect be thought to have vanished from the modern mind, in another it is keener and more searching than ever. Thus at the present hour more people, probably, than ever before in human history have a painfully keen impression of social responsibility, of themselves as being art and part in "man's inhumanity to man." Even before the war, acute observers pointed out that this is the old sense of sin under a new guise. "Men," Mr. Holland said, "are aghast at their own indifference to and acquiescence in the social wrongs by which they are surrounded. Men are appalled by their powerlessness to modify or remedy the iniquity and the suffering inherent in the modern industrial system. They are stung by a sense of guilt, they are overwhelmed by the feeling of impotence, they are distracted for a remedy. Social responsibility has become, like the law of old, a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. It may be more the sense of paralysis than of leprosy, but it drives them to God."

If we have got so far, the question whether our failure to treat each other as we ought needs to be forgiven, will depend solely on whether we believe in God. To hear a man who believed in the moral being of God deny that he had any need of forgiveness would affect us like being told by a friend, in a picture-gallery, that for him the works of

the great masters have no beauty. At once we should recognise that we cannot make him see. But, if we ventured on advice, we should counsel him to contemplate some great picture, to look and look again, at intervals, with the conviction that something would happen. New perceptions would stir. The beauty spread before him would slowly grow visible. In like manner, let the insensitive man take pains to understand Jesus, let him not withdraw his attention from that Figure ; and he will learn the truth about himself. It is not alone through the realisation of Jesus that God touches the springs of penitence in men ; He may do it through many an experience ; but the experience is always that of beholding a goodness that shames us.

(2) A second objection to forgiveness is the fear, possibly even the conviction, that the thing is impossible, because contrary to the nature of the world. Is not spiritual law, if anything, more rigid than physical, as being absolute for thought, not contingent ; and what can this mean except that the consequences of sin cling to us for ever and ever ? We no doubt reject the Oriental doctrine of Karma, binding this life to past lives by chains of inflexible causation, but is not Karma a reality within our present existence ? Surely it is nature's last word that the results of sin are irreversible, that our future is only an inescapable conclusion drawn from the fixed premises of the past. If, then, the universe re-acts against sin with an inexorability of which the stedfast procession of the stars is only a faint emblem, let us submit to fate. Let us consent to be what we have become. With resignation, but with no whining, let us live out our life at the level to which sin has brought it.

In this contention, it will be felt, there is an element of nobleness ; if it errs, it does not err meanly. There speaks in it the instinct that nothing in earth or heaven can tamper with the sanctions of moral law. In the language of the

army, you cannot "wangle" exemption from the effects of wrong: being is emphatically such that our sin finds us out. Nothing in talk about forgiveness can be so unconvincing, so subtly distressing to a man's better self as hints about a poor and feeble remission of sin. The man who has begun to face moral realities will not be persuaded that there is no price to pay. He knows well that life is not like that. If the preacher does not keep him right on the point, the novelist will.

But while the objection is far from being ignoble, it is nevertheless mistaken. In the first place, although the past plainly is unalterable in the sense that it has happened and to all eternity will have happened, yet its value, its meaning for life, is still an open question. Only the future can decide on that. It is in the future that its significance will not merely appear but will actually be fixed. From later experience there may come to rest a new and beneficent meaning on what seemed at the time to be unrelieved disaster, just as a musical chord constantly is qualified in force and tone by succeeding chords and phrases, or a dreary stretch of landscape may from a more advanced point reveal itself as an exquisite element in a beautiful scene. Something like that can happen to our sins. Their significance, though not their occurrence, can be changed. As it has been put, "they may become the occasions of some spiritual state of great value which could not have been reached without them. Till the power is known that can so transform them, they remain mere blots: and the man, in whose experience they are, feels the weight of an irremovable burden. But if there is known to him some transforming power his despair vanishes." [1] I am not arguing, just at the moment, that evil is an element of good, or even that it is a necessary means to good, both

[1] Temple, *Mens Creatrix*, pp. 173–4.

which positions seem to me more than doubtful, since it is at least possible that a *greater* good might have been realised if the sin had not been done ; I am arguing that in a spiritually constituted world we are not shut up to the notion that sin must entail final and hopeless fatalities of evil. And this because life is perpetually betraying the presence within it of a power able so to deal with past events, which as events it cannot obliterate, as to transmute their significance. Everything depends on how under God a man reacts to his own history, how he takes it, what he does with it. It depends, supremely, on whether his attitude to what lies behind him—its wickedness, its soiling, its legacy of frailty—is simply moral, or also religious and believing.

In the second place, it is wrong to say that forgiveness is impossible, that a man has made his bed and must lie on it, because there is a living God. For certain purposes, it is simpler, when we try to interpret life, to leave God out. Even human personality is an unmanageable nuisance to the system-maker, scientific or metaphysical. This wild element in the universe puts him out, like a small child asking odd questions in the drawing-room. But if man as person troubles the doctrinaire theorist, still more does God. Fatalistic ideas which might be plausible and even menacing if He were not there, become incredible since He is there. It is because the Bible was written by men whose eyes were uninterruptedly on God, to whom fellowship with God was the datum from which they started, that it has no fatalism in it, and no pessimism. Instead, it is full of an element which both fatalist and pessimist have parted with ; it is full of wonder. How we can often in Scripture divine the marvelling spirit that lies behind the speaker's voice, and gives it a note of exhilaration and triumph ! And it is worth noticing that some of the most remarkable passages of the kind concern our present subject, the for-

giveness of sins. The announcement rings out: "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and as a cloud thy sins: return unto Me, for I have redeemed thee." Something incalculable has occurred; something that can be known yet passes knowledge; and it can have no source but the creative love of God. Then in exultation the prophet summons Nature to his aid in celebrating the height and depth of pardon: "Sing, O ye heavens, for the Lord hath done it. Break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein" (Isa. xliv. 22–23). This is a strain which Jesus prolongs and deepens. He more than any is sure there is such a thing as forgiveness, not because it is small, but because it is great and fatherlike. When He told the parable of the prodigal, He meant His audience to perceive that the chief character in the story is not the younger son but the father. Had the father died, the wanderer would have come back to find the door shut and his chance of personal reconciliation gone for ever. But the father lived and waited for him. If, then, Christ is trustworthy, if there is a living God who loves and acts, the forgiveness of sins is the most stupendous and tragic and blessed possibility of life.

(3) Thirdly, it may be argued that forgiveness is essentially immoral, and that by its proclamation of Divine pardon the Christian religion betrays an obvious ethical inferiority to other, though perhaps more sombre, faiths. This, by the way, is an objection of special interest; for though I cannot allow it to be sound, it does call attention to the fact that the doctrine of forgiveness, indicating as it does our dependence rather than our freedom, is one which in an eminent degree distinguishes the religious from the purely moral standpoint. For it is characteristic of religion to take a graver view of sin than is taken by morality, while at the same time affirming, as the other does not, the possibility

of its being removed. Accordingly, when it is held that forgiveness is contrary to morality, that is in itself a dim and confused testimony to the truth that Divine pardon is a thought transcending ethics, because it is a thought wholly and peculiarly religious. It is not immoral, but its origin lies beyond morality, just as poetry has a way of being above or beyond logic.

When St. Paul, accused of encouraging laxity by his gospel of free gracious pardon, had to meet this very charge of demoralising believers, he replied in effect that no one could suggest this who knew what his gospel was or had observed its influence in human lives. He points out that faith makes men one with Christ, i.e., attaches them by bonds of choice to One in whom God's holy love is personally present; and that while faith is not itself finished goodness of character, it is a condition out of which goodness naturally springs. In other words, he denied that God accepts us because we are good, but he taught that the terms on which He accepts us ensure our becoming good. That is a point of argument which, though very old, is not in the least obsolete. Forgiveness, as a matter of fact, does not do what it must do if it is immoral; it does not demoralise. This does not mean that the gospel of forgiveness cannot be twisted into antinomianism; St. Paul admits that, and deals with it in its own place. But no instance can be brought forward in which the man freely pardoned for Christ's sake and on the ground of his self-identification with the sinless Son of God has been thereby reduced to a state of moral degeneracy, enfeebled in character, or impoverished in ethical ideals.

Further, what is a demoralised mind? It is a mind which is increasingly losing its former horror of sin; which has come to acquiesce in sin more lightly and make terms with it as a recognised part of life. Can it be seriously argued

that a practised psychologist, if invited to report on what went on in the mind of a man who at the moment was receiving Divine forgiveness, would conclude that the total outcome and meaning of the experience was to induce a more lenient view of moral evil? Surely the question is its own answer. No true case of pardoning and being pardoned, whether between man and man or between God and man, could ever in the moral nature of things be or be conceived, which did not involve in the pardoned self an intensified awareness of the sin done, its hatefulness and its stain. If we assume levity on the one side or the other, instantly the ethical conditions of the experience itself cease to exist. What remains may be defiance faced by mere weak connivance, or some other equally melancholy distribution of parts; but forgiveness, in the profound, subduing and cleansing import of that great word, it cannot be.

Other difficulties about forgiveness are in all likelihood the unrecognised legacy of old controversies. It has been held, for example, that a man can only have fellowship with God after a definite series of prescribed experiences—so much torturing contrition, so much exultant joy; and this may have contributed to an impression in some minds that forgiveness demands from the penitent a working up of morbid and artificial emotion. Again, others probably are repelled and mystified by the confession they think is looked for from the pardoned man that he himself—his character, will, life—is worthless in God's sight. How can this be, if God is Father; and why should we be expected to feel it? In short, the precise meaning of the humility implied in seeking or taking pardon is a difficulty. Or once more, many think it incredible that God, the Infinite and Absolute One, can enter into such relations of intimacy with the individual life as pardon must denote, or act toward him and upon him with such distinct and particularis-

ing love. With these difficulties we may well feel unfeigned sympathy; they are real, not fictitious; and it is doubtful whether the mind that cannot in some degree enter into them and view them on the inner side has itself discovered the all but unbelievable wonder of Divine pardon, or understood the cumulative effect which present-day education, with its impressive conceptions of natural law and inviolable sequence, is bound to have on the modern intelligence. After all, we are sure of forgiveness only in faith. To reach and grasp it demands a leap of the soul. The pardon of God is a thing so great that no one rightly believes it save he who feels—in view of God's self-disclosure—that he has no other choice.

It is true, not all objections to the idea of Divine pardon can reckon upon sympathy. There is, for example, the attitude of those who are too clever to be humble, and encounter the thought of forgiveness with an indulgent smile. "I, who have a cultivated mind," says Renan, "find no evil in myself, and in all things turn spontaneously to what seems to me most beautiful. Were all men's minds as cultivated as my own, all, like myself, would be in the happy case of finding it impossible to do wrong. An *educated* man has but to follow the delightful bent of his inner impulse." Either this is pride meant quite seriously, or it is the persiflage of jesting irony. If a jest, we are probably entitled to read it by the light of another dictum from the same great scholar's pen: "God! Providence! soul! Good old words, rather heavy, but expressive and respectable." If pride, then we may reflect that even to Renan the words of Jesus are applicable: "I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." But it is somehow hard to praise oneself in Jesus' presence. And if we want to raise a laugh about the forgiveness of sins, we must go elsewhere.

It is possible that to some whose sympathy with Christian religion is sincere and active the importance which, in the preceding argument, has been attached to the forgiveness of sins may seem so exaggerated as to be indefensible. Of that we need not complain. It is perhaps a hasty view that all beliefs are of equal value at all periods of life. True faith may co-exist with temporary colour-blindness in regard to this or that aspect of the Gospel. But such blindness to one of the great thoughts of Christianity cannot last, where faith is real ; a day comes when the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, and everything has to re-crystallise about it. In the Great War men not irreligious woke up abruptly in many instances to the Sovereignty of God—the intense reality of Some One Unseen in whose protection they could lose themselves, like the eaglets nestling under the outstretched pinions of the mother bird. Till this discovery had been made, sanity itself was in peril. So, too, all religious men who keep a living conscience must waken some time, whether slowly or in a flash, to the fact that unless they can reach pardoned fellowship with God, all is over with their inward life. Up to that point they may have been Christians of the half-fledged order, with a faith markedly indecisive or embryonic. But now into their twilit religion there breaks some fall into gross sin, or contact with a saint, or a new awareness that Jesus Christ is present and is looking them through and through and making them ashamed. Character, even on the best interpretation, begins to look very drab and seedy in the light shining from Him ; and they then know once for all, without reasoning, that the one thing needful is to be forgiven less for what they have done than for what they are.

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